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AUTHOR Staley, Wanda L.
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ABSTRACT

The increase in divorce rates following the American adoption of no-fault divorce is correlated with radical changes in the lives of many parents and children. However, the dissolution of a marriage does not mean the end of a family. Family ties are forever, and family therapists can assist by easing the pain of divorce and empowering parents to be proactive and to ensure that their children experience a healthy adaptation to divorce. The authors suggest some research-based strategies and therapeutic techniques to help parents develop self-care and child-care skills. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/GCP)

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Running head: DIVORCE AFTERMATH

Divorce Aftermath: Empowering Parents...Easing the Pain

Wanda L. Staley

Department of Leadership and Secondary Education

Morehead State University

w.staley@morehead-st.edu

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Abstract

The increase in divorce rates following the American adoption of no-fault divorce is correlated with radical changes in the lives of many parents and children. However, the dissolution of a marriage does not mean the end of a family. Family ties are forever, and family therapists can assist by easing the pain of divorce and empowering parents to be proactive to ensure that their children experience a healthy adaptation to divorce. The authors suggest some research-based strategies and therapeutic techniques to help parents develop self-care and child-care skills.

Divorce Aftermath: Easing the Pain and Empowering Parents

In recent years divorce has become a reality for many of us, either through the dissolution of our own marriage or that of a family member. Amato (2000) described the dramatic rise in divorce rates by noting that five percent of first marriages ended in divorce in the mid-nineteenth century, yet, approximately 50 percent of all first marriages in recent years will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992, cited in Amato, 2000). A large part of the change in recent years comes as a result of Americans adopting no-fault divorce.

The increase in the divorce rate is related to a focus on the search for individual personal fulfillment and self-actualization. This pursuit has also resulted in a decrease in the amount of time children have with their parents. It is estimated that children have lost ten to twelve hours of parental time per week since 1960 (Hewlett, 1991). With increasing numbers of women joining the work force, gender roles have become less stereotyped. One result of this societal change has been the inclusion of fathers in the delivery room when their children are born. Fathers are more involved in the rearing of their children and parental leave is often available to both parents. Men have become more involved with parenting. Dual career couples have become more nearly egalitarian.

These changes in society, home and work spread quickly into the legal system. During the 1970s men began receiving the same opportunities to become custodial parents as women. With this new trend, spousal conflict accelerated. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) stated that approximately 15%-25% of couples who divorce with children now engage in bitter disputes over who will be awarded the right to raise the children and make the most important decisions about their well-being.

Some commonly held beliefs provide the rationale for our current attitudes toward divorce, the belief that if parents are happier, the children will be happier and the belief that divorce is a temporary crisis which wields its most harmful effects at the time of the breakup. This has been disputed by a large number of research studies in the 1990s summarized by Amato (2000) that found negative effects of divorce on children in academic success, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social competence, and long-term health. Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee(2000) found that children value family stability, not their parents' happiness; many children are quite content even when their parents have an unhappy marriage.

Purpose of this Paper

While divorce may signal the end of a marriage, it does not mean the end of a family or that lives have to be destroyed. The purpose of this paper is to furnish therapists with research-based suggestions for working with families before, during, and after divorce. These suggestions are offered in order to help to ease the pain of adjustment and to empower parents as they learn new ways of functioning as a family.

The Pain of Divorce for Children

Loss of Parent

Often during the first years of the divorce process, children are left to fend for themselves because of their parents' inability to parent for months and sometimes years after the breakup. Frequently, parents cannot rise above their own adult agony to see their children's pain. Blau (1994) found that as many as 30 to 50 percent of children of divorce suffer because of their parents' inability to provide adequate parenting during this time of upheaval and adjustment. During this period of time, children are subject to developing insecurities that can well last into their adult lives.

Transitioning from a predictable, orderly, secure lifestyle to unpredictability, as well as less competent parenting, can be very stressful for children. The experience of parental divorce makes many children more dependent, aggressive, whiny and defiant. The pressures on newly divorced mothers are such that just getting through the day is a tremendous challenge. Custodial mothers are frequently preoccupied by guilt and are prone to put few limits on their children. When the boundaries are blurred, children tend to feel more insecure and engage in acting out behaviors (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Many children feel increasingly unimportant in their parents' lives as these changes occur (Ellis, 2000).

Loss of Childhood

Some special hazards in divorced adults' parenting, in addition to diminished authoritative parenting, occur when the parent and child roles are reversed. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) report that an increasing number of parents are turning to their children for counsel and support. These children are forced to grow up faster, and when confronted with adult problems often become apprehensive or resentful. Probably the most detrimental outcome of "parentification" is that children develop a sense of helplessness because they feel responsible for problems that they are unable to resolve. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that by age fifteen, the parentified child developed a sense of helplessness which was evidenced by depression and low self-esteem. Girls who had been emotionally leaned on as children were the greatest casualties.

Children respond in a variety of ways to their parents' divorce. More often children experience sadness, confusion, and feelings of insecurity. It is not uncommon for children to blame themselves for the break-up. "Divorce destroys the reassuring rhythms and structures of family life, especially those that give a child's life order and predictability" (Hetherington &

Kelly, 2002, p. 46). For all children, their parents' divorce involves a loss of trust. Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee, (2000) likened worried children to little hawks who watch their parents very closely looking for signs of stress that will affect their availability as parents. As they observe their parents quarreling, leaving, being preoccupied, children tend to question their parents' reliability. All young children of divorce experience changes in their lives that are difficult to cope with. The behavior of the custodial parent is a key factor in providing a buffer against post divorce stress for children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Gender Differences in Responses

Boys and girls differ in their reaction to divorce. In general, boys have difficulty adjusting and are at risk for exhibiting increased problems at home, school, with peers and authority figures. Older elementary boys are developmentally vulnerable to the lack of a father in the home. Divorced, custodial mothers and their sons are at risk for conflict because of the natural process of boys moving away from their mothers and identifying more with their fathers. Girls, on the other hand, often become withdrawn and introspective (Stahl, 2000).

Long-Term Effects

Numerous studies show that adult children of divorce have more psychological problems than those raised in intact marriages. A child's most potent buffer against post-divorce stress is a competent, involved custodial parent (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, this is not the usual pattern. The most common pattern during the post-divorce period is diminished parental affection and lessened positive involvement with an increase in parental irritability, punitiveness and an increase in unpredictable, erratic discipline (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Wallerstein, et al. (2002) discovered from their interviews that adult children of divorce stated in plain language that the myth that divorce is a temporary crisis which exerts pain only at

the time of the break up of the marriage is untrue. The children of divorced parents stated that it was the years following the divorce during which there were so many uncertainties and transitions that the pain was greatest.

The major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Divorce aftermath rises in adulthood as serious romantic relationships come to the forefront. When it is time to choose mate and build a new family, there is an upsurge in the effects of divorce. Those who have not experienced a good model of the marriage relationship are negatively impacted when they begin searching for love, intimacy, and commitment. The anxiety the young adult of divorced parents experiences frequently leads to making bad choices in relationships, giving up when problems are encountered, or avoiding relationships altogether (Amato, 2000; Wallerstein, et al, 2002).

The Pain of Divorce for Parents

Non-Custodial Fathers

Non-custodial fathers are often confused by their role, and because they do not have a daily presence in their children's lives, tend to develop instead, a companionate role rather than a parental one. Many men adopt the "Disneyland Dad" stance, especially during the first year. As a rule, fathers are more lenient, and rarely set rules or act as disciplinarians (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The parent who leaves usually continues to be involved for a year or two after the divorce and then frequently fades from the children's lives. The National Survey of Children conducted by Furstenberg and his colleagues (as cited in Ellis, 2000) found that 35 percent of the children surveyed had had no contact with their fathers over the past five years. Sixteen percent had not seen their fathers during the previous year. Only one third of the group had an ongoing

relationship with their fathers and saw them at least once a month. Ten years after the divorce, two thirds of the children in the National Survey of Children had not seen their fathers in over a year (Ellis, 2000).

During the 1990s this has changed somewhat. Heatherington and Kelley (2002) reported that fathers are maintaining more contact with their children since divorce procedures have changed. Nevertheless, a number of non-custodial fathers dropout of their children's lives because they find being halfway involved painful. Not being a part of their child's daily spontaneous moments limits the amount of closeness that the non-custodial parent can have with his children. Frequently, the father feels more like a tour guide who meets his children in artificial environments rather than in a natural home environment.

More normal parenting occurs when children spend overnights with their father. Time together with established routines draws them closer together (King, 1999; Nisivoccia, 1997; Simmons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999). Amato and Gibreth (as cited in Amato, 2000) found that, ". . . authoritative parenting on the part of noncustodial fathers consistently predicted children's higher academic achievement and lower internalizing and externalizing problems" (p. 1282). Amato (2000) summarized recent research on non-custodial fathers and noted a change from past research findings, "These results tentatively suggest that noncustodial fathers might be enacting the parent role more successfully now than in the past, with beneficial consequences for children" (p. 1282).

Communication Problems

One of the most difficult things for parents to do following their divorce is to put their differences aside and work together for the benefit of their children. Three-fourths of divorced parents are not able to achieve a cooperative relationship in which they can discuss their

children's problems, coordinate household rules and discuss child-rearing practices (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). When parents cannot communicate directly with each other, the child is the one who suffers.

Easing the Pain

What can be done to help alleviate the pain of divorce for children? The partial solution to this painful dilemma is to empower parents with knowledge and skills to help them understand the magnitude of their choice and the deleterious effects of divorce on the lives of all involved unless proactive steps are taken to meet the challenges of ending a marriage.

Parents and children need to be helped to realize that the dissolution of a marriage does not mean the end of a family. Family ties are forever. The divorced couple will most likely be involved in each other's lives forever through marking special events in their children's lives. Parents who understand this will benefit from transitioning as soon as possible from the role of spouse to co-parent. Being able to make this transition will take great resolve and strength of character, especially for the parent who was left.

Parents who can face their personal anger, pain, and guilt and focus on the needs of their children will provide ballast for their children during this adjustment period. Caring extended-family members, positive sibling relationships, and warm friendships can reduce the likelihood that divorce will result in long-term disruption of children's development (Grych & Fincham, 1997). Suggestions for easing the pain of divorce for children at varying developmental stages have been developed by several researchers (e.g., Kalter, 1990; Wolf, 1998; Neuman, 1998; Beckmann, 1986).

Empowering Parents

Empowering parents so that they can practice self-care includes assisting individuals in accepting the reality of the situation, and assisting them in finding emotional support outside of the immediate family. Support groups, friends, personal counseling and extended family are sources for the parent to turn to for emotional support instead of turning to their children and placing them in the spousal role as burden-bearer and confidante.

Finding Resources

Parents who are able to involve themselves in activities outside of their immediate family will experience inner satisfaction that they are facing their challenge and, in the process providing a healthy model for their children. The parent who has outside resources is less likely to use children as confidantes or place them in the parenting role. Parents have the responsibility of reassuring their children, by their actions as well as by their words, that even though these are difficult times, they are strong enough to be there for their children. Helping children understand that each parent merits their love will be most helpful. When children know that it's okay to love both parents, and have the support of warm, firm authoritative parents they are much more secure.

Developing Parenting Skills

Empowering parents with parenting skills so that they can be effective parents is one approach that will bring positive benefits to all concerned. Behavior modification support programs which provide parent training in how to control a child's behavior using consistent rewards and punishments, time-outs, and communication skills, can be very helpful in equipping post-divorce parents so that they can help children safely navigate the murky waters of divorce. Authoritative parenting empowers parents so that they feel more in control of their children,

more confident and validated as effective parents (Eccles, Early, Frasier, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997).

Authoritative parenting is more rare in divorced homes, especially during the first year because it requires so much energy and focus (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).Yet, this approach offers a significant protective effect against the stresses children face. Authoritative parenting is the approach of choice because it provides warmth, consistency and support. These parents are skilled communicators and are firm, but responsive disciplinarians.

Some examples of authoritative parenting techniques include verbal controls, deprivation of privileges, time-outs, explanations and reasoning (Berk, 2000). Explanations and reasoning are beneficial because the child's misbehavior is confronted and the child is helped toward developing an internal locus of control. According to Hetherington and Kelly (2000), authoritative parenting offers protection for the child on three levels: parental consistency provides a stable home environment; mutual trust and respect are present which makes controlling a child much easier; and, authoritative parents appear to be more attuned to their child's needs, feelings, and abilities. These parents know how much pressure to apply and when to withdraw; they give their children developmentally appropriate chores, and they do not make their child their confidante or pal. Instead, children look to this person as a parent.

Hetherington and Kelly, (2002) discovered that children who experienced authoritative parenting emerged from divorce as the least troubled, most socially responsible, and highest achieving of all the children in their study. Evidence abounds demonstrating that parents who are proactively involved with their children equip them to escape some of the pain of divorce.

Proactive Parenting

There are a number of proactive stances that parents can take to ensure that their children experience a healthy adaptation to divorce, such as: both parents staying involved in their children's day-by-day experiences; permitting children to continue the activities they enjoyed prior to the divorce; reducing the level of conflict between parents; making time to talk with children about the changes in their lives, their worries and fears; and, helping children develop their coping skills will strengthen each child's ability to adapt (Stahl, 2000).

Those parents who can forgive each other will lessen the pain of divorce for their children. They will be able to communicate with each other and make a smoother transition from their role of spouse to co-parent. As parents are able to separate their own behavior from their relationship with their children and from the other parent, their children will experience much less conflict in their lives and have an opportunity to adjust much more easily to the divorce experience (Stahl, 2000).

Gender differences. When the mother is the custodial parent of older elementary and adolescent boys, conflict is often present. This is the period when boys are identifying with their fathers as their role model and they miss the daily interaction with him. It is not uncommon for boys to mimic their father's gait, speech and behavior toward their mother, even when they are not closely associated with their dad. This angry, aggressive behavior can lead to much conflict with the custodial mother and lead to acting out behaviors outside of the family sphere.
Girls appear to adjust better in the early days of divorce. Sadness and introspection are common. Both sexes question whether they are the cause of the divorce and experience guilt over some of their misdeeds.

Fathers appear to have fewer problems in controlling their children. Instead, fathers frequently need guidance in how to communicate with their children and setting limits for the older child. Parents who find they are unable to work with an irate spouse carry the heavier weight of responsibility in minimizing the impact of divorce. However, one good, nurturing parent can do much to bring stability into the lives of children and minimize the pain of the divorce experience.

Co-Parenting

When parents can work together as co-parents, everyone wins. Co-parenting helps to stabilize children throughout the stages of divorce. Being able to co-parent after divorce is a heroic feat. It is not the divorce that upsets children, but the ongoing conflict that threatens their world and diminishes their self-esteem (Blau, 1994; Stahl, 2000). Children vary in their resilience, but even the strongest will eventually wither under the strain if their parents aren't mature enough to work together for the benefit of their children. Acting in a mature manner enables parents to put their children's needs, their emotions, personal priorities and the entire divorce process into perspective.

Parents who can rise above their personal anger and hurt to provide nurturing and emotional support for their children are paving the way for their children to experience healthy adjustment. Children need to be reassured by their parents' actions as well as words that they will be there for them. The most effective way to accomplish this is to spend time with the children. Moments together doing everyday things are meaningful to the child.

Although parents can't wave a magic wand and make the pain of divorce disappear, parents can provide a listening ear and reassurance to their children that they will always love them and be protective of them. Some children will need more support than others, but all

children will need the love and nurture of two parents for maximum adjustment (Stahl, 2000). Both parents will have to work to make this a reality.

Parent Education Programs

Parent education programs have become widespread around the country in response to the increasing number of divorce and custody cases seen in family and juvenile courts (Ellis, 2000). More and more states are making these programs mandatory for divorcing parents who have children. Parents are provided information to help them better understand how divorce will affect them and their children. Hopefully, as parents learn about the needs of their children and strategies for co-parenting, the pain of divorce can be lessened (Stahl, 2000).

Mediation

Another approach frequently recommended for divorcing parents who are not involved in heavy conflict is mediation. Court mandated mediation is becoming more common to aid parents in developing a parenting plan that is mutually acceptable to both parents. When parents work with a mediator to resolve conflict, they are more likely to reach a settlement sixty to seventy percent of the time (Stahl, 2000). A high percentage of those who use mediation report greater satisfaction and there is less litigation over custody (Emery, Mathews, & Kitzmann, 1994).

Developing a detailed, precise plan of custody, access, and decision-making that is clear to both parents is very important. Every aspect of the child's life should be spelled out in the plan. Sixty percent of the family attorneys surveyed who used parenting plans found that parenting conflict is reduced when there is a mutually developed plan (Ellis, 2000).

Specialized Courts

The use of specialized courts is helpful to those parents who have attended parent education programs, mediation and have developed a parenting plan, yet cannot reach

agreement. Specialized courts use one judge to provide focused attention to a family. Families get attention, assistance and more control over the court process upon filing for an informal conference with the judge (Ellis, 2000). Therapists can serve as resources to help parents find mediation and specialized courts.

Programs for Children

New programs have been developed for children as well in response to the rising divorce rate of the 1970s and 1980s. Ellis (2000) cites examples:

1. Kid's Turn—this program was founded by a Superior Court Judge in 1988.
2. Specialized Treatment Programs--Through participation in these treatment sessions, children learn to see the situations that make them feel a sense of helplessness and anxiety.

Feedback from divorcing parents indicates that these treatment programs have made an impact on the parents who are involved so that many resolve to immediately begin to disengage from the parental warfare which is alienating their children and begin to implement the parenting plan (Ellis, 2000).

Displacement Communication

Establishing a communication link between parent and child helps reduce the child's emotional distress and maladaptive behavioral defenses that the child could use to protect himself from feelings of distress. Kalter (1990) lists some ways children benefit from adults communicating with them:

1. Children are enabled to confront their own troubles and underlying conflicts as a result of observing their adult's calm in the face of the child's emotional pain.

2. The child gains a new perspective on events and options to explore through the insights he gains into the causes of the emotional distress as a result of communicating with an adult.
3. Communication between adult and child provides an opportunity to understand the child's misconceptions and provides an opportunity to correct them.
4. The child has the opportunity to express his worries/concerns when talking with an adult (Kalter, 1990, p.26).

Often parents and children do not discuss emotion-laden issues which requires the child to express his private thoughts, feelings, concerns. Instead parents tend to communicate with children in terms of requests or directives. Private feelings, thoughts or concerns are not usually topics of discussion in families. Rather than communicate their feeling through spoken language, children cope with their internal turmoil by not thinking about it, acting as if all was well, and stating that they are not upset. They are more likely to act out their feelings rather than put them into words. For example, the child who is sad about not seeing one of his parents very much after the divorce will probably not express himself in words, but will probably withdraw from friends or find ways to compensate for his pain through such actions as trying hard to do well in school, sports, overeating or using drugs. Children and adolescents, alike, are reluctant to become consciously aware of their emotional distress (Kalter, 1990).

Adults can falsely assume that children are doing well because they are not seeking adult attention when, in fact, children are having a difficult time. Adults must be aware of children's use of defenses to protect themselves from emotional pain. One approach that equips adults to

effectively initiate or enhance communication with children is the use of displacement techniques.

Displacement techniques employ indirect forms of communication to communicate with children around emotionally charged issues. Many displacements involve the kinds of activities and materials that are appealing to children such as, hand puppets, action figures, dolls and dollhouses, and drawing. Displacements can also be verbal such as, reading a story together, making up a story that fits a particular child and her circumstances, and the inclusion of stories about imaginary boys and girls or children in general (Kalter, 1990).

The rationale for using the displacement technique is to address the nature of the child's emotional distress, the observable behavior problem, the possible source of difficulty, optional ways of coping, and a reassuring positive outcome to the underlying difficulties the child is experiencing. Kalter (1990) suggests some advantages of displaced communication:

- Validates child's feeling and demonstrates understanding;
- The child is not left alone to deal with his pain;
- The child's feelings do not frighten or repel the parent;
- The child is made to feel that he is not weak or babyish for having these feelings, and is assured that many children share them;
- The adult is able to communicate the expectation that things will get better (p. 208).

Summary

In summary, parents can be most helpful to their children if they will:

- Develop a parenting plan and abide by it;
- End the conflict with the other spouse ;

- Acknowledge your losses/sadness about the divorce instead of masking sadness with anger;
- Separate from spousal roles to co-parenting roles;
- Resolve to manage anger so that it does not contaminate your parenting or harm your child;
- Learn to manage anger;
- Communicate away from the children;
- Schedule times for discussion with your ex-spouse;
- Minimize the number of transitions children must make;
- Avoid involving children in loyalty conflicts, i.e., pumping child for information, using children as message carrier, using children to spy, pressuring child to take your side, bad mouthing the other parent, interpreting the child's love for their other parent as a threat to you, using your child as a mediator, asking your child to keep secrets;
- Give children permission to love their other parent.

The long-term effects of divorce on children are subtle, yet they have been documented in many studies (Ellis, 2000). As parent-child bonds are weakened, children are socialized by their peers and by the mass culture in their teenage years. The family becomes less influential in terms of transmitting values. As a result of the break-up of their family structure, these young people lose faith in the security and durability of human relationships which opens them up to a pattern of risk-taking behaviors due to their experience with close, family relationships.

After more than thirty years, it is obvious that the divorce revolution has not improved children's lives (Ellis, 2000). We know that divorce launches children on a trajectory through

life filled with many hazards. The studies on the effects of divorce on children are many, and can be summed up by stating that divorce roughly doubles the risk for children of a host of emotional disorders (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1991 as cited in Ellis, 2000).

Although a magic wand cannot be waived to make the pain of divorce disappear, parents can learn to compartmentalize their relationship, separate out issues related to the marital relationship from those related to parenting relationship and make the well-being of their children their priority (Ahrons, 1995). It is crucial that parents understand that divorce is a process which initiated many life changes that continue to impact children at all levels, they are in a better position to help ease the pain. Parents can be empowered to provide a listening ear and reassurance to their children that they will always be loved and protected by them. Some children will require more reassurance, but all will need the love and nurture of two parents working as co-parents to provide maximum adjustment. Children who receive this type of love and support will be better equipped to face the challenges of today's world and flourish in their adult relationships.

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